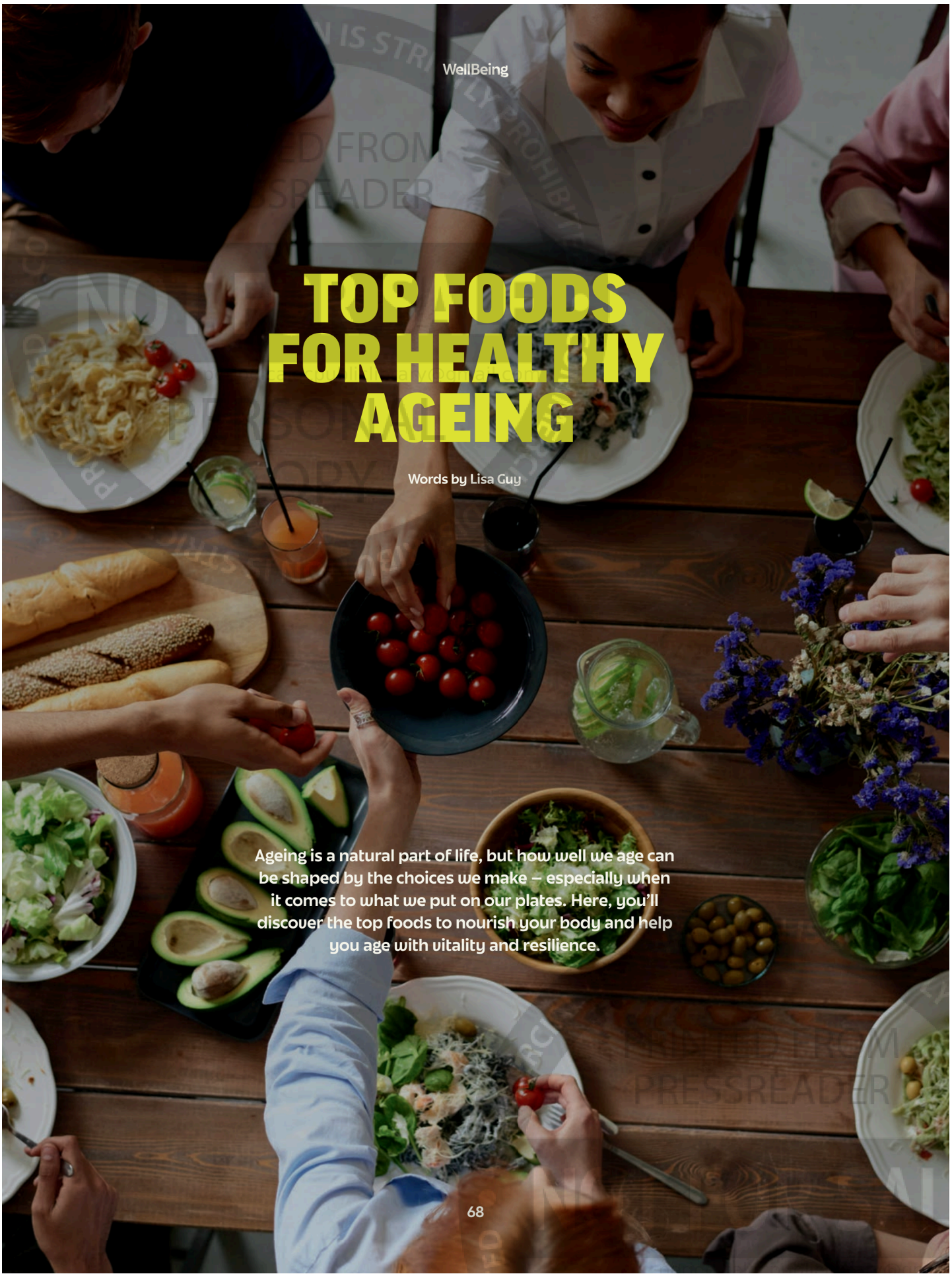
- Nutrition / Ageing



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The foods we consume play a crucial role in our overall health and wellbeing as we grow older. Healthy ageing and longevity are best achieved from the inside out with a wholesome diet rich in beneficial fats, protective antioxidants and anti-inflammatory phytonutrients.

Incorporating the following nutrient-dense foods into your daily diet will support optimal health and reduce the risk of chronic illness, to help you age with strength and vitality.

Wild salmon

Wild salmon is undoubtedly one of the best foods for healthy ageing due to its high levels of omega-3 fatty acids. These beneficial fats have potent anti-inflammatory properties. Chronic inflammation is a key contributor to many age-related diseases, including heart disease, arthritis, cognitive decline and premature ageing. Omega-3s improve cardiovascular risk factors by lowering triglycerides and LDL cholesterol levels. These beneficial fats are also essential for healthy brain function and can enhance cognitive function, memory and mood, and reduce the risk of cognitive decline and depression.

Omega-3s are important for maintaining the skin's protective lipid barrier, helping to keep your skin feeling soft and hydrated. Women's skin becomes dry when oestrogen levels drop in menopause. Omega-3s are important for preventing skin dryness and reducing the risk of premature skin ageing such as wrinkles and fine lines.

Astaxanthin is a carotenoid pigment found in salmon. This beneficial pigment not only gives salmon its vibrant red-orange colour but also acts as a powerful antioxidant. Astaxanthin has the advantage of being able to cross the blood-brain barrier, where it can help protect the brain from oxidative damage and support cognitive health.

Aim to consume wild Alaskan salmon, fresh or tinned, three times a week. Salmon is also a great choice because it's a low-mercury fish. Salmon is delicious pan-fried, oven-baked or barbequed with salad or roasted and steamed veggies. Add salmon to poke bowls, sushi and pasta dishes. Add flavour to salmon with a nutritious topping such as salsa, pesto, lemon and herbs, and Asian-inspired sauces made with tamari, ginger, garlic, honey and lemon juice.

Dark-green leafy uegetables

Dark-green leafy vegetables are loaded with important nutrients that support heart health and offer protection against cardiovascular disease, which is crucial for healthy ageing.

Dark-green leafy vegetables such as spinach, kale and rocket are high in dietary nitrates, which the body converts into nitric oxide. Nitric oxide relaxes and dilates blood vessels, which improves blood flow and reduces blood pressure. Lowering blood pressure is one of the most effective ways to reduce the risk of heart disease and stroke, which are common age-related health conditions.

Dark-green leafy vegetables are also abundant in antioxidants such as vitamin C, vitamin E and beta-carotene. These antioxidants protect the heart by neutralising free radicals, which can cause oxidative damage to cells and tissues in the cardiovascular system. Reducing oxidative stress helps prevent the development of atherosclerosis.

Folate, found in high amounts in dark-green leafy vegetables, plays a crucial role in regulating homocysteine levels in the blood. Elevated homocysteine levels is a risk factor for heart disease, as they can damage blood vessels and increase the risk of blood clots. Folate helps convert homocysteine into benign compounds, thereby protecting the cardiovascular system.

Dark-green leafy vegetables are also excellent sources of vitamin K, which is essential for blood clotting. Vitamin K helps regulate clotting in a way that prevents the formation of dangerous blood clots in arteries, reducing the risk of heart attacks and strokes.

You will also get a good dose of lutein and zeaxanthin from eating dark-green leafy vegetables. These powerful carotenoids play a crucial role in maintaining eye health as we age. They have antioxidant and anti-inflammatory actions that help neutralise harmful free radicals and reduce inflammation, helping to protect against macular degeneration and cataracts.

Examples of dark-green leafy vegetables include rocket, broccoli, collard greens, kale, bok choy, mustard greens, spinach and Swiss chard. Incorporate spinach, kale or Swiss chard into your morning smoothie or green juice for an extra nutrient boost. Use a mix of leafy greens in salads, Buddha bowls, rice-paper rolls, sandwiches, burgers and wraps. Add bok choy, collards or kale to stir-fries, soups and stews. Enhance quiches, frittatas, pasta dishes, lasagna, pizzas and dips with greens like spinach, kale and broccoli.

Dark-purple berries

Purple berries such as blueberries, blackberries, acai and elderberries are a fabulous source of antioxidants called anthocyanins, which give these delicious berries their vibrant purple-blue colour. Consuming these antioxidant-rich berries regularly is highly beneficial for healthy ageing, as they help improve brain health, reduce inflammation and protect against chronic disease. The darker and the more vibrant the colour, the better.

The antioxidants in these berries help protect brain cells from oxidative stress and inflammation. Regular consumption of purple berries has been linked to improved cognitive function, memory and brain health. Studies suggest that regular consumption of berries rich in anthocyanins can help slow age-related

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Enjoy green tea hot, or iced with a squeeze of lemon, or try a matcha latte with almond or macadamia nut milk.

cognitive decline and may protect against Alzheimer's disease and dementia by decreasing inflammation.

The antioxidants in these berries also help protect against numerous age-related diseases including arthritis, heart disease, diabetes, macular degeneration and cataracts.

Purple berries are also beneficial for skin health due to their high vitamin C levels, which are essential for collagen production. Improving collagen production helps maintain skin elasticity and reduce signs of fine lines and wrinkles.

Add fresh or frozen purple berries to smoothies, porridges, chia puddings, yoghurt, raw desserts, healthy berry crumbles, baked goods and salads. Use dried purple berries to toss through granola or add to protein balls and trail mixes. Freeze-dried purple berry powders are also handy to have on hand. Look for organic berries when you can as berries have thin skins that can absorb pesticides easily.

Brassica vegetables

Brassica vegetables are packed with phytonutrients that contribute to healthy ageing. Some nutritious brassicas you can include in your daily diet include broccoli and broccoli sprouts, kale, cabbage, cauliflower, Brussels sprouts, bok choy, turnips and turnip greens, daikon and radish.

Brassicas are unique as they are rich in glucosinolates, which are sulfur-containing compounds that when broken down produce biologically active substances such as indol-3-carbinol and sulforaphane, which support detoxification and help protect cells from damage.

Sulforaphane plays a crucial role in detoxification and overall health. Broccoli sprouts are a particularly rich source. Sulforaphane aids in detoxification by supporting liver function and removing toxins from the body. Sulforaphane is known for its strong antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties. Sulforaphane is needed for the production and regulation of glutathione, one of the body's most powerful antioxidants. Glutathione protects cells from damaging free radicals and oxidative stress, which are major contributors to ageing and age-related diseases.

Indole-3-carbinol (I3C) is important for hormonal balance as it supports the metabolism of oestrogen, which is particularly important for perimenopausal and menopausal women. I3C has been shown to reduce the risk of oestrogen-related cancers, such as breast cancer, by helping the body break down oestrogen into safer forms. I3C possesses anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties that protect cells from damage.

Brassicas such as kale and collard greens are particularly rich in carotenoids, such as beta-carotene, lutein and zeaxanthin. These essential nutrients support eye health, improve vision and reduce the risk of degenerative eye conditions such as macular degeneration.

Some nutritious ways to enjoy brassica vegetables include roasted Brussels sprouts and cauliflower steaks, drizzled in olive oil and seasoned with herbs and spices. Add broccoli and cauliflower to stir-fries, curries, soups and frittatas. Try mashed cauliflower, shredded raw Brussels sprouts, kale and red cabbage tossed through salads, and fermented cabbage in sauerkraut and kimchi. Add kale to your green smoothie or try crunchy kale oven-baked chips. Broccoli sprouts can be easily incorporated into salads, wraps, sandwiches, smoothies, stir-fries, omelettes, blended through pesto, or as a soup, curry or pizza topper.

Green tea

Green tea offers a wealth of benefits when it comes to ageing well. Green tea is rich in a unique type of polyphenol called epigallocatechin gallate (EGCG), which acts as a powerful antioxidant and anti-inflammatory compound that neutralises free radicals and reduces oxidative stress and inflammation. This protection is crucial for preventing cellular damage and chronic inflammation, which are major factors in ageing and age-related diseases. EGCG has been shown to support cardiovascular health by reducing LDL cholesterol and increasing beneficial HDL cholesterol.

Drinking green tea can also benefit mitochondrial health. Mitochondria are the powerhouses in all of our cells, including our brain cells, that produce energy. Mitochondrial function declines as we age. Improving mitochondrial health is a key factor in enhancing our longevity, bolstering vitality and safeguarding against disease. EGCG helps to stimulate mitochondrial biogenesis, enhance energy production and protect mitochondria from oxidative stress. Mitochondrial biogenesis is when new mitochondria are generated within the cells, which is crucial for maintaining cellular energy production and supporting overall cellular function in our brain and body.

Drinking green tea regularly has been found to positively influence brain function by boosting memory and attention and improving mental clarity. Green tea's beneficial effects on cognition are due to a combination of two nootropics (cognitive-enhancing compounds), L-theanine and caffeine. Caffeine stimulates the central nervous system and increases energy metabolism throughout the brain, while L-theanine has a calming effect. L-theanine reduces caffeine's stimulating effect while still enhancing its ability to improve focus and brain function.

Drinking green tea regularly can also help reduce premature skin ageing. EGCG slows down collagen and elastin breakdown, to improve the skin's strength, tone and elasticity.

Choose a certified organic green tea or matcha tea. Enjoy green tea hot, or iced with a squeeze of lemon, or try a matcha latte with almond or macadamia nut milk. Add a spoonful of matcha powder to your next smoothie, smoothie bowl, raw dessert or salad dressing.

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Dark-green leafy vegetables are loaded with important nutrients that support heart health and offer protection against cardiovascular disease, which is crucial for healthy ageing.

Avocado

Avocados are a nutrient-dense fruit that offers numerous benefits for healthy ageing. Avocados are an excellent source of monounsaturated fats, particularly oleic acid. These healthy fats have anti-inflammatory properties and can help support healthy brain function. These beneficial fats also help support cardiovascular health and help maintain healthy cholesterol levels. Oleic acid has a moisturising effect on the skin, helping it retain moisture and stay soft and supple as we age.

Avocados contain high levels of antioxidants, including vitamin E and vitamin C, as well as various carotenoids such as lutein and zeaxanthin. These antioxidants help protect the skin from UV damage and can reduce premature skin ageing. They are also beneficial for supporting eye health and protecting against age-related macular degeneration. The dark-green part of an avocado nearest to the skin contains the highest levels of carotenoids.

The combination of healthy fats and antioxidants in avocados supports brain health by reducing oxidative stress and inflammation, which can contribute to cognitive decline and neurodegenerative diseases.

Some delicious ways to enjoy avocados include smashed avocado toast, as guacamole, added to salads, sushi rolls, rice-paper rolls, wraps, sandwiches, burritos and tacos. Blend avocado through pesto for a delicious pasta sauce, add some to green smoothies, green salad dressings or in vegan chocolate mousse and other raw desserts.

Pomegranate

Pomegranates are rich in several antioxidants that are particularly beneficial for ageing skin. Pomegranates contain potent antioxidants including punicalagins, anthocyanins and vitamin C, which help protect the skin from UV and environmental damage. They reduce inflammation and prevent oxidative stress helping to defend against premature skin ageing. These antioxidants also boost the production of collagen and prevent collagen breakdown to maintain the elasticity and firmness of the skin.

Pomegranates contain compounds that can be converted by gut bacteria into urolithin A, a metabolite shown to improve mitochondrial function by promoting mitophagy, the process of removing damaged mitochondria and replacing them with new, healthy ones. Mitophagy tends to decrease as we age, which contributes to the decline of overall cellular health.

Pomegranate arils are the perfect addition to fruit salads, yoghurt, muesli, porridge, Bircher, smoothie bowls and salads. They can even be added to guacamole for a burst of flavour.

Pomegranate juice is delicious in iced teas and mocktails or used as a base for marinades or a tasty glaze for roast chicken or lamb.

Beetroot

Beetroot is an outstanding food for healthy ageing, primarily due to its rich betalain content. These natural pigments are responsible for beetroot's vibrant colour and powerful antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties. Betalains reduce oxidative stress, support liver detoxification and promote cardiovascular and cognitive health, making beetroot an essential addition to a diet focused on longevity and vitality.

Beetroot is also rich in nitric oxide, which helps widen blood vessels, improving blood flow and circulation. This vasodilating effect supports healthy blood pressure and reduces the risk of cardiovascular disease. Better circulation also benefits brain health by ensuring that the brain receives important nutrients and adequate oxygen, to help maintain cognitive function and lower the risk of age-related cognitive decline and neurodegenerative diseases.

Beetroot also provides prebiotic fibres called inulin. Prebiotics promote the growth of beneficial bacteria, supporting a healthier gut microbiome. Inulin is a type of soluble fibre that reaches the colon undigested where it is fermented by beneficial gut bacteria, producing beneficial short-chain fatty acids, such as butyrate. Short-chain fatty acids are important as they improve the integrity of the gut lining, reduce inflammation, improve insulin sensitivity and support healthy immune function.

Beetroot with its earthy sweetness can be enjoyed in many dishes. Toss roasted beetroot through a green salad with walnuts, pomegranates and feta. Enjoy roasted beetroots and other root vegetables drizzled in a little maple syrup and olive oil as a side dish with salmon, chicken or lamb. Grated raw beetroot adds extra crunch to salads, sandwiches and wraps, nori or rice-paper rolls and Buddha bowls. Add some fresh beetroot to your next vegetable juice with some carrot, celery and apple. Try making Borscht (beet soup), roasted beetroot hummus, homemade beetroot chips, beet kvass (fermented beet drink), pickled beets, or a pasta sauce made with roasted beetroot and feta. Try decadent beetroot brownies or chocolate cake as a healthy treat.

Lisa Guy is an experienced Sydney-based naturopath, health writer and founder of artofhealing.com.au.

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